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ABSTRACT

This document, which is intended for schools preparing to undergo an evaluation as part of the Distance Education and Training Council's (DETC's) accreditation process, details the process of writing a self-evaluation report (SER). In the introduction, the SER is defined as the heart of the DETC accreditation process and is described as a road map for institutions in developing truly self-analytical and honestly introspective assessments of their present and future. Next, benefits of writing an SER are listed along with suggestions for developing an analytical writing style when completing an SER. A sample nonanalytical response to an evaluation question is provided and compared with an analytical response to the same question. The issue of selecting areas to analyze in an SER is examined, and the differences between internal and external analyses are illustrated through several examples. Sixteen topics are listed as possible topics for inclusion in an analytical SER. Among the topics listed are the following: existence of employment opportunities for the institution's graduates; appropriateness of instructional materials' reading level; validity/reliability of tests; usefulness of remarks on test papers; possible weaknesses in student services/administration that are causing dissatisfaction among students; and changes in faculty performance in recent years. (MN)

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DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER

How to Write an Analytical Self-Evaluation Report

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DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER
NUMBER 12

by

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DETC OCCASIONAL PAPERS (formerly *NHSC Occasional Papers*) are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between distance study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the DETC.

Introduction

It's been called the heart of the accreditation process . . . a useful planning document . . . a valuable training tool for new staff . . . a repository for an institution's corporate memory . . . a public relations resource . . . management's window on the inner workings of the business . . . a reason for conducting a formal internal evaluation of all activities in a school . . . a rationale and blueprint for institutional renewal . . . and a road map for future survival.

An SER is all these things and much more!

The Self Evaluation Report (SER), which the Accrediting Commission of the Distance Education and Training Council requires each applicant for accreditation to submit every five years, has been relatively unchanged in the past 40 years.

However, with the publication in the Spring 1995 of the *DETC Accreditation Handbook*, the "Guide to Self-Evaluation" document has undergone a significant overhaul. It has been expanded in scope and depth of coverage. It not only asks several new questions, it also challenges applicants for accreditation to present **truly self-analytical responses** to a number of important questions.

The preamble to the 1995 "Guide to Self-Evaluation" states:

The SER serves as a document that tells a story about your institution, including how the institution originated, what your institution offers the field of distance education and training, how it is managed, how it complies with accreditation standards and requirements, and what the institution's plans are for future improvement and growth. It should also present in a business-like way insightful analyses into trends and patterns within an institution and discuss candidly the larger issues and challenges confronting it. An SER is, fundamentally,

a road map for institutions in developing a truly self-analytical and honestly introspective picture of how they are and where they are going.

The "Guide to Self-Evaluation" document in the *DETC Accreditation Handbook* provides specific directions on how to prepare an SER in terms of format and physical appearance. But what may not be so clearly disclosed is the subject addressed in this *Occasional Paper*. How do you prepare an SER that will be the **best** possible document for accomplishing the critical task it is supposed to achieve, namely, ensuring the institution's accreditation or re-accreditation?

Outside observers of the DETC accreditation procedure for self-evaluation have high praise for the vast amounts of data and information which the Guide solicits. However, one weakness noted in many Self-Evaluation Reports was that they "were not very analytical, or introspective or evaluative."

A good SER presents more than mere information and data. It goes well beyond the "bare bones," businesslike style of responding to questions with brevity.

A good SER offers the intended reader—the visiting on-site evaluator—data and interpretation, information and insight and a fact-based presentation of the institution's strengths and weaknesses. It also offers the reader a sense of what the institution is all about.

Some reports are long on words but short on insight. They seem to lack genuine candor in discussing, in an open and honest way, the institution's weaknesses and failings. Real problem issues are glossed over, and the big challenges confronting the institution are scarcely mentioned.

Yet another shortcoming in some SERs has been the failure to develop patterns and themes within the overall Report that give an accurate portrait of just what the institution stands for, where it is coming from and where it is heading.

It's as if after reading dozens of pages, the reader comes away from the Report with no more understanding of the institution than if he or she could understand the problems of Amtrak after reading train schedules.

Another soft spot in many SERs is their failure to track and analyze patterns of issues confronting the institution over a period of years, and the Report's failure to address candidly the tough questions confronting institution. Some SERs read as if they had been thrown together at the last moment.

And finally, too often the job of writing an SER is delegated to a single, lower level staff member with minimal guidance and interest by top management, other than to scan the Report before the visit by the Examining Committee. Such ill-prepared Reports can have fatal results to the institution's application for accreditation. Most poor SERs can be traced directly to top management's lack of appreciation for the importance of preparing a genuinely introspective and analytical document, one that tells the whole story.

Some reasons for writing analytical reports are:

1. A truly analytical Report will "disarm" the visiting evaluators and show them how the institution is solving its problems on its own. (The evaluators will likely discover the problems anyway! And, they will likely offer their own solutions!)
2. An analytical SER will be much more useful in—

- long-range strategic planning
 - genuine self-evaluation
 - internal management problem solving
 - curing chronic system problems
 - establishing open internal communications
 - creating an atmosphere of creativity among staff by involving them in solutions to identified problems
 - providing a platform for new product development, enhancing current services and stimulating continuous organization renewal
 - saving precious time and efforts by describing problems and solutions “up front,” so that visiting examiners can focus on helping the institution.
3. An analytical SER will help ensure that the Chairman’s Report (following the on-site accrediting visit) will include not merely statements of “problems” but the institution’s “solutions,” thus contributing to a balanced picture that includes—and is positively flavored with—the institution’s perspective.

Developing an Analytical Writing Style

The 1995 “Guide to Self-Evaluation” presents numerous opportunities for SER writers to be candid and creative in presenting analytical responses.

Revised questions in the 1995 Guide which solicit analytical reactions include these:

- *As candidly as possible, describe the significant challenges currently facing the institution. State how the process of DETC self-evaluation has helped clarify/identify any major issues or problems.*
- *Describe major institutional changes and improvements made since the last accreditation examination of the institution.*
- *State what problems, actions, or policies should be emphasized to the visiting evaluators as examples of significant institution achievements in quality distance education and training.*
- *Describe any trends and/or patterns within the institution which demonstrate the overall quality of the institution.*

The above questions are pointed invitations to SER writers to “open up” to the reader and get down to business in discussing the real issues, the life and death issues, facing the institution. These questions provide a platform to discuss where the institution is heading and how it plans to get there—without necessarily compromising the proprietary or confidential business plans of the organization.

Here are “before” and “after” responses to SER question XII. E. 3, which reads: *Describe the major institution changes and improvements made since the last accreditation examination of the institution.*

A Non-Analytical Response

In the five years since the last visit of the Accrediting Commission, the XYZ Academy has consistently improved its courses and its services. It has added six new courses of study, acquired a new computer system and added 12 new staff. Enrollments have

climbed 40%. There have been no changes in top management or in direction, etc. . . .

The response above is factual. But does it really offer the kind of response that reveals the introspection and self analysis that a good SER should have? Facts alone are sometimes not enough. Let's look at a revised version of a response to the same question.

An Analytical Response

The XYZ Academy embarked in 1991 on a major campaign of institutional self analysis and continuous renewal. The 1990 Chairman's Report identified three significant areas for XYZ to address: updating of courses, enhancing and modernizing student services, and curing chronically low course completion rates.

In addition to these three areas, XYZ had identified, in early 1991, an additional problem that needed to be addressed: falling enrollment levels had been creating a cash flow crunch that was stifling all other efforts to upgrade the Academy.

In order of priority, the Academy attacked the four problems in a systematic way. Below is a discussion of the statement of each problem since 1990, the central cause of the problem, the method of attacking the problem and the results achieved to date, etc. . . .

But why go to the effort of "telling all" by discussing the problems facing the institution? Why not let the Examining Committee find out for themselves what the problems are?

Because the Committee will find the problems anyway and will likely recommend *their own solutions*. And the solutions may not be the

ones that the institution is prepared to implement. It is far better to anticipate what problem areas are most critical and then present a solution in the SER. Why let a visiting group suggest solutions to problems that you already know—or should know?

Institutions cheat themselves when they prepare less than candid reports. The greatest benefit of voluntarily undertaken self-evaluation is the formal opportunity the exercise presents to allow you to (1) determine what needs to be done, (2) describe how to accomplish it, and (3) show a track record of solid achievement.

Areas to “Analyze” in Your SER

Self-analysis can be fun. Whether you do it only for internal planning (nothing compels you to share your results), or to satisfy an SER requirement, do it. Whether you do it to know what changes to make or to satisfy yourself that no changes are needed, do it. Each institution should consider including some intensive self-analysis of its operations on a continuing basis, not just for SER purposes.

Your analysis may be a sophisticated statistical one with built in controls and allowable margins for error. But more probably, it will be the development of simple questions asked about specific problems confronting the institution.

You must know your objectives before doing the analysis. What do you hope to learn; whether your students have developed proficiency in a particular skill; whether you need to install an 800 number for your students?

The analysis may be internal or external. That is, you may analyze data already available in your internal records; or you may direct your survey to external sources such as ex-students, graduates, em-

ployers, and others. Although an internal analysis may be easier and quicker to accomplish, its results may have less credibility. But both can be useful.

Your choice of areas to analyze may be tricky. While there are many pertinent subjects for analysis already suggested in the SER Guide, these may not be the areas in which you are the most vulnerable and therefore may be irrelevant. On the basis of introspectively asking yourself the questions listed in the Evaluator's Rating Forms in the *DETC Accreditation Handbook*, you should be able to identify areas of weakness and those in which you would honestly like to make improvement. To satisfy yourself that a problem truly exists or does not exist you should develop a plan for your analysis.

One word of caution. If you are considering a change in your operation in order to accomplish greater success, *you must define success*. What does it mean to succeed? For example, if your goal is to increase the percentage of graduates who get jobs and you are studying the relationship between course completion and getting a job you may have defined success as getting a job. Or if your goal is to assure that all textbooks are current, you will wish to define "current" before you classify the texts as "current" or "out of date."

Here are a few suggestions of areas in which you may wish to do an analysis that can be used in preparing an "analytical" SER. You should decide in advance:

1. The objective: what do you wish to learn from your research?
2. The data needed: what information must you have to answer your questions?

3. The methodology you will use to gather your information.
4. The definition of success.

Example A of a problem suggested from Accrediting Commission Standard I. A., Description of Objectives:

Internal

1. *Objective:* To determine if course prepares graduates to pass licensing exam.
2. *Data Needed:* Need to know which questions (and how many) on internal exams match questions on licensing exams.
3. *Methodology:* Have faculty do an item analysis of questions on licensing exam comparing number of matching items on your internal exams.
4. *Definition of Success:* Success = 80% of all questions on licensing exam are included in internal tests given to students.

External

1. *Objective:* To determine if course prepares graduates to pass licensing exam.
2. *Data Needed:* Need to know the score results of your graduates on recent licensing exam.
3. *Methodology:* Analyze scores to determine percent success versus failure. Repeat for subsequent years to identify trends.

4. *Definition of Success:* Success = 90% of students receive passing grade on externally administered licensing exam.

Example B of problem suggested by Accrediting Commission Standard VII. A., Admission Practices and Enrollment Agreements:

Internal

1. *Objective:* To determine if admissions criteria successfully screen out applicants who will not finish the course.
2. *Data Needed:* Need to know characteristics of admitted students. Need to know if given their high school background, sex, age, prior experience, physical limitations, they finished course?
3. *Methodology:* Staff uses internal records to develop matrix of admission qualifications and outcomes data, comparing those who completed with those admitted.
4. *Definition of Success:* Success = finishing course.

External

1. *Objective:* To determine if admission criteria successfully screen out applicants who will get and keep a job.
2. *Data Needed:* Need to know characteristics of admitted students who got jobs. Did those who got jobs keep them beyond initial period of employment?
3. *Methodology:* Develop a survey to go to employers of graduates. Learn if graduates retained jobs and compare reasons for failure with deficiencies in qualifications of students when admitted.

4. *Definition of Success:* Success = getting and keeping a job in a field related to course.

Other questions which may suggest themselves to you as you consider ways to improve the quality of your institution and as you are preparing your Self-Evaluation Report are:

Example C suggested by Accrediting Commission Standard II. G., Teaching Devices:

1. *Objectives:* To determine if students would learn more easily if audio or video tapes were added to the current educational materials?
2. *Data Needed:* Need to know success ratios of students who have tapes added to other materials.
3. *Methodology:* Develop a control group of students who have the benefit of tapes with a group of students using the current educational materials.
4. *Definition of Success:* Success = higher % of students using tapes finish course than those who do not have benefit of tapes.

Example D suggested by Accrediting Commission Standard III. A., Examination Services:

1. *Objective:* To determine if students learn more when they were required to take tests with subjective type questions rather than the current objective true-false, multiple choice and other objective tests.

2. *Data Needed:* Need to test students using only subjective tests to measure whether they more readily are given placement in the field, or more readily complete the course with a passing grade.
3. *Methodology:* Develop a control group of students who continue to be tested with only objective questions as opposed to a group which is able to demonstrate its knowledge with subjective type tests.
4. *Definition of Success:* Success = placement in career field or successful completion of course.

Note: The above examples are merely intended to suggest the great number and varieties of ways that your analysis could be conducted. The assumptions made throughout are undoubtedly debatable.

This is just a brief sampling of the types of analysis which you can make about your institution, and which can aid you in writing a truly analytical Self-Evaluation Report.

The following page gives a list of other useful topics you can explore as you prepare an analytical SER.

Possible Topics:

- Is there evidence that employment opportunities exist for graduates of my institution and the income level implied in my promotional literature is accurate?
- Is the reading level of instructional material keyed to the reading competence of the average enrollee?
- Are course texts sufficiently comprehensive to permit students to pass internal examinations?
- Are texts up-to-date?
- Should I introduce a resident training component to increase the success of my distance education program?
- Are course examinations valid and reliable? Do they mislead students?
- Could I increase the effectiveness of the learning experience through the use of telephone testing?
- How can I improve the response time it takes to get test results back to students?
- Do individualized remarks on test papers motivate students and increase their chances of success?
- Is testing more effective if students have had the benefit of a pre-test?
- What weakness in student services or administration is causing dissatisfaction among my students?
- Do faculty in degree programs have an adequate number of hours of study in a degree program at the level they are teaching to meet faculty requirements stated in DETC's "Policy on Degree Programs"?
- Have the evaluations of faculty performance improved over the last 2 or 3 years?
- Are sales materials accurate and honest in setting forth the stated benefits for taking a course?
- Are the potential income claims stated in my literature true? Have they changed from last year? Can I document every claim—implied and overt—in my promotional materials?
- How does the catalog description of my courses compare with actual curriculum content?

Conclusion

In strategic planning, the plan itself may never be used, but the planning process is indispensable. So too with preparing "analytical" Self-Evaluation Reports. The process of listing patterns, gathering data, analyzing trends and laying out solutions to identified problems is what the accreditation process is all about.

An analytical SER is potentially one of the most powerful tools you have at your disposal to permit you to give your institution the one gift we cannot give ourselves: immortality.

About the Author

Mrs. Josephine L. Ferguson has spent more than 35 years in the management of postsecondary education at the university, state and federal levels, retiring in 1987 from the position of Regional Administrator in Student Financial Aid for the U.S. Department of Education for Region V. Mrs. Ferguson holds a Masters in Mangement degree from J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University. She also speaks and serves as a consultant on higher education administration. Mrs. Ferguson authored the *DETC Occasional Paper Number 11—Admissions Policies: The Key to Success*, which was published in November 1994.

Mrs. Ferguson has served as a public member of the DETC Accrediting Commission since 1987 and has participated in more than 60 on-site examinations.

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